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INFO RUEHZL/EUROPEAN POLITICAL COLLECTIVE PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 TBILISI 001522

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DEPT FOR GEORGIA COORDINATION GROUP, EUR/CARC AND S/WCI

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/03/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KAWC](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)

SUBJECT: CLAIMS OF ATROCITIES IN GEORGIA MERIT SERIOUS
INVESTIGATION

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D).

11. (C) Summary and Comment. In advance of S/WCI Ambassador Williamson's September 8-11 visit to Georgia, the Embassy has compiled a preliminary list of the many reports we have received of "ethnic cleansing" and accusations of "war crimes" that have taken place in the conflict zones and areas adjacent to the conflict zones taken from the Georgian press, international journalists on the ground, NGOs, local residents, and the Georgian government. Limited access to many affected areas makes assessing the reports difficult. Although called a war by some, we believe that from a legal perspective the violence is more likely to be considered an international conflict, thus triggering the application of broader portions of international treaties governing the conduct of war. The Geneva Convention of 1949 identifies a set of individuals and property entitled to protection and prohibits certain actions against these protected classes. If the criteria defined by the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia for "ethnic cleansing" and "war crimes" are used as a guide, then serious investigation is warranted based on the reports below. End Summary and Comment.

General context

12. (C) On August 8, 2008, the Russian Army (RA) entered South Ossetia under the auspices of protecting its peacekeepers and citizens in South Ossetia. Russian President Medvedev claimed that the Georgian Army (GA) committed atrocities against Russian citizens, and the RA entered to protect the South Ossetians and Russian peacekeeping forces stationed in South Ossetia. The conflict soon spread beyond the conflict zone in South Ossetia into Georgia proper, with the Russian Armed Forces attacking civilian and military targets, and occupying substantial swaths of territory before withdrawing the bulk of their forces August 22. There are reports of Cossacks, South Ossetian separatists and RA elements kidnapping, wounding and raping Georgians, both civilians and soldiers, as well as looting, and robbing banks, even after a cease-fire was declared the weekend of August 16-17. There are also reports of South Ossetian forces and others affiliated with Russia began a systematic identification, separation, and killing of ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia and surrounding villages. Separatist South Ossetian "president" Kokoity at one point boasted to the press that several ethnic Georgian villages in the territory "have ceased to exist." Even as discussions were ongoing about the withdrawal of Russian troops, South Ossetian forces occupied the predominantly Georgian town of Akhagori in the far eastern edge of the conflict zone and, according to Georgian officials, forced local residents to accept Russian passports and South Ossetian administrative officials or to leave. This action was enabled by RA forces who set up a checkpoint on the main road to Akhagori, between Georgian police and South Ossetian forces.

¶3. (C) Many of the offenses are alleged to have occurred in South Ossetia, access to which is still controlled by Russian forces. Although a small number of independent observers, including journalists, Human Rights Watch and the International Committee for the Red Cross, have been able to travel into South Ossetia, they have not been given full access to the territory. In addition, Russia continues to refuse entry to many, including OSCE monitors and U.S. government officials. The incidents listed below represent initial compilation efforts and should not be considered comprehensive, as a unimpeded investigation to confirm facts is not yet possible. These initial reports warrant further investigation.

What We are Hearing

¶4. (C) Since August 7, post has received many reports from all over Georgia which can be categorized as:

¶A. Willful Killing. Embofffs have received reports of Russians rounding up ethnic Georgians in South Ossetia and shooting them. Human Rights Watch (HRW) researchers say they have documented evidence that cluster bombs were used in and around the villages of Shindisi and Pkhvenisi, in the Gori District, and in the town of Ruisi in the Kareli District. GoG authorities claim that a cluster strike in Gori city center killed at least eight civilians and injured dozens. They also suggest that Russian forces deliberately used "Afghanistan"-style cluster bombs (an apparent reference to the Soviet invasion), which have red ribbons attached to the munitions in order to attract children. HRW noted that the

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Georgian military also used cluster bombs. The Georgian MOD wrote a letter to HRW acknowledging that it used cluster munitions, but noted that they were only used against RA military forces coming from Russia through the Roki Tunnel. (Embassy note. Apparently, these were Israeli GRADLAR 160 multiple launch rocket systems and MK4 LAR 160 type (with M85 bomblets) rockets with a range of 45 kilometers. End note.) In the letter they explain that the bombs were directed not at civilians, but at Russian military hardware. The same letter also stressed that the Russian side aimed the cluster bombs at residential areas, targeting the civilian population. Dutch journalist Stan Storimans was killed in among those who died in Gori and Israeli journalist Zadok Yehezkeli was injured.

¶B. Destruction and Appropriation of Property. Eyewitness accounts have relayed incidents of irregular forces looting Georgians homes and businesses, car-jacking international journalists, and robbing reporters. Some accounts accuse Russian troops and separatists of hauling furniture, televisions, personal items, and household fixtures from private homes. Russian and separatist forces burned down houses in Surani, Khashuri, Tkviavi, and Tidznisi and in some cases were proud of the fact that Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia had been destroyed. On August 22, de facto South Ossetian leader Eduard Kokoity told the Russian news agency Regnum that Georgian enclaves in South Ossetia had been liquidated, with the villages of Kekhvi and Tamarasheni being totally destroyed. The Georgian government has publicly distributed satellite imagery of Tamarasheni, a predominantly Georgian town north of Tskhinvali, to show widespread fire damage.

C: Attacking Civilian Objects. Georgian government officials allege that Russian forces ignited the Borjomi forest, a National Heritage Site, and initially refused Turkish firefighters permission to extinguish the blaze. The roads were blocked, preventing Georgian firefighters from reaching the blaze, which then spread to neighboring villages. The government claims that 50,000 hectares of national forest were burned in the Ateni National Forest as well.

D. Killing or wounding a person outside of combat. According to local inhabitants, a resident of Gori was shot when he attempted to stop looters in his home. It is unknown how many civilians in the Tskhinvali area were killed by bombardments from Georgian, South Ossetian and Russian forces. On August 8-11, Russian warplanes bombed the residential area of Gori, killing 45 civilians and injuring more. As a result of these bombings, eight apartment buildings were destroyed in Gori, leaving about 500 families homeless. In a village near Agara (Kareli District), locals reported Russian military jets bombed an ambulance.

E: Attacking protected objects. GoG reports claim bombing of ambulances in Agara (Khashuri region). While local national staff at the Embassy received reports of damage at an Orthodox monastery and the Nikozi church from the . In Azhara (Kodori Gorge) Russian forces reportedly threatened nuns. Russian and Ossetian irregulars reportedly robbed the Gori-Samtavisi Eparchy, and took personal items from the priest there.

F: Destroying or seizing civilian property. While initially targetting military objects, Russian forces eventually attacked civilian targets, which in turn set off mass looting. The Georgian government reports looting in the following villages: Brotsleti, Mejvriskhevi, Gorijvari, Tkviavi, (Gori District), Breti, Avnevi, Tseronisi, Knolevi (Kareli district), and Khandaki, Doesi, Karaghadi (Kaspi District). Assets damaged or destroyed by the Russian military and/or South Ossetian separatist include, civilian radar stations in Savhsebi and Tbilisi, civilian administration buildings at Poti port, a German-owned cement factory in Kaspi, the Didi Liakhiv Museum in Kurta, the Ivane Machabeli Museum in Kurta, the Sachkhere Hospital, the Lomisi Beer Factory, and a Gori television transmission station. The Enguri hydro-electric station and the Ganmukheri youth camp were captured. The GoG alleges landmines were set around the Enguri power plant and on the Khaisi and Chuberi bridges. Not unexpectedly, the city of Gori was hardest hit by Russian missile attacks, with the university, post office, hospital, and three museums sustaining damage. The Georgian government also reported mines in a dozen utility facilities (such as electricity substations) around the city. Russian bombs and a missile struck the ground above the Baku-Supsa Pipeline four km south of the Vaziani airbase. Russian troops reportedly looted goods from Poti port, vandalized the Georgian Coast Guard headquarters, and stole a UK-provided

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vessel. British Petroleum representatives reported that on August 18, drunk Russian soldiers arrived at the Baku-Supsa pipeline pumping station in Nabakhtevi and began shooting their weapons into the air, harassing the local workers. A recently released report by the GoG indicates that the following villages sustained significant damage during hostilities: Kvemo-Achabeti, Tamarasheni, Kekhvi, Kura, Zemo Achabeti, Kemerti, Dzarcemi, Tskhinvali, and Kheiti.

G: Rape-Sexual Violence. The GoG reported multiple instances of Russian Cossacks raping Georgian girls/women in villages from South Ossetia to Gori. Additionally, GoG claimed local sources told them of Ossetian Separatists taking Georgians hostage in the villages of Nikozi, Dzveri, Tkviavi, Karaleti, Kaspi, Ditsi, and Arbo. Deputy Minister of Interior Zguladze told visiting Representative Christopher Smith of a disturbing kidnapping of a 25-year old woman by Russian forces from a mini-van; according to Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria, the woman was released on August 23 in very poor condition. Two senior Georgian parliamentarians told visiting Senator Corker that they understood 17 Georgian women had been raped, but cautioned that the number could be much higher, since Georgian women often do not report rapes because of the social stigma attached.

H: Enforced disappearance of persons. Post received reports

that Russians were gathering Georgians and taking them to South Ossetia for unknown reasons. In some accounts, Georgians were blindfolded and transported away. GoG authorities reported that Ossetian separatists, with the help of Russian soldiers, kidnapped Georgians from the villages of Bobnevi, Marana, Dzevera, Khidistavi, Tchalaubani and forcefully took them to a forest. Deputy Foreign Minister Giga Bokeria told Ambassador on August 25 that over 250 Georgians were being held in a Tskhinvali camp and were used as forced labor to clean up the city. (Note: Detainee exchanges have been ongoing since the cease-fire. End note.)

I: Rendering an area ethnically homogeneous by using force or intimidation to remove persons or given groups from these areas. GoG authorities maintain that the Russian army and Ossetian separatist militia deliberately targeted the civilian population of Georgian villages in the Didi Liakhvi valley, the Patara Liakhvi valley and the Frone Valley in South Ossetia. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and eyewitnesses report mass destruction of Georgian villages in these regions. GoG authorities cite UNOSAT satellite images as clear evidence of the damage inflicted on Georgian villages around the city of Tskhinvali. Government sources indicate as many as 40,000 Internally Displaced Persons, many of whom were forced out of ethnically Georgian villages south of Tskhinvali, may need long-term shelter in Gori, as ethnic Georgians are not being allowing to pass through Russian checkpoints to return to their homes. Post has also received numerous reports of ethnic Georgians in South Ossetian villages being pressured to accept Russian passports, submit to Ossetian control, or leave. The GoG has distributed a summary of its ethnic cleansing allegations in a report entitled "The Facts on Ethnic Cleansing of Georgians by the Russian Army." (Text forwarded to EUR/CARC.)
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